

Matthew 3:1–12 (NRSV)

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’ ”

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

The Kingdom of Heaven

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Matthew 3:1-12

In the Talmud there's a very funny story about a Christian philosopher or judge who makes it known far and wide that he is as honest as the day is long. However, the philosopher has the opposite reputation. The word on the street is that the philosopher accepts bribes. To catch him in the act and to mock him, a Jewish woman gives the philosopher a nice oil lamp made of gold. Then she goes to the philosopher with her brother and asks the philosopher to split their father's property. She said to the philosopher: I want to share in the inheritance of my father's estate. The philosopher said to the brother and sister: Divide it.

Unbeknownst to the Philosopher, the woman's brother is actually the famous Rabbi Gamliel. Gamaliel says to him: It is written in our Torah: In a situation where there is a son, the daughter does not inherit; it all goes to the son. The philosopher retorts: Since the day you were exiled from your land, the Torah of Moses was taken away and the Gospel was given in its place. It is written in the Gospel: A son and a daughter shall inherit alike. As a side note, there is no such injunction in the Gospels.

The next day Gamliel brings the philosopher a Libyan donkey as a bribe. Afterward, Rabban Gamliel and his sister come before the philosopher for a judgment. The philosopher has now changed his tune. He says to them: I proceeded to the end of the Gospel, and it is written: I, the light of the world, did not come to subtract from the Torah of Moses, and I did not come to add to the Torah of Moses. The philosopher continues: And it is written in the Torah: In a situation where there is a son, the daughter does not inherit. The woman, about to lose the case, reminds the philosopher of the nice oil lamp she has bribed him with, and says to him: May your light shine like a lamp. But then Gamliel, reminds the philosopher of his own bribe of the donkey and says: Don't forget, the donkey came and kicked the lamp over. Thereby was the philosopher caught in his deceit.

The story is a playful example of interreligious rivalry between the Jews and the Christians in the first centuries of the Common Era. It's meant to be a humorous critique of the philosopher, not just because he accepts bribes, but because he, a man of supposed wisdom and expertise in Christianity, doesn't even know his own scriptures very well. He first tells Gamaliel that the New Testament has superseded the Torah. He even refers to a Gospel commandment that doesn't exist. But then later he discovers that the Bible itself says "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." He uses this passage when it suits his purpose. In one fell swoop the story exposes the philosopher as corrupt and unknowledgeable, and also upholds the Torah by referring to a New Testament passage that clearly states that the Torah is not superseded by the Gospel.

So, just what does this story have to do with us this morning? Actually something very interesting. When the philosopher quotes the New Testament, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets," he is quoting from the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel we are

reading this morning. The passage is found just a couple of chapters after this morning's reading. And the passage continues in this way: "Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

In our reading this morning John the Baptist appears in the wilderness crying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Matthew's Gospel is greatly interested in the kingdom of heaven. For John the Baptist, and for Jesus, too, the kingdom of heaven is very much about this world. The kingdom of heaven is an ethical concept. It's all about how we act in this world. And it's continuous with the Jewish commandments. According to the Biblical scholar Ulrich Luz, Matthew's use of "'reign of heaven' with its strong ethical accent fits well the rabbinic usage." He says, "Just as the rabbis challenge people to carry the yoke of the reign of God already in the here and now, it is decisive for Matthew to live in the present in keeping with the reign of heaven so that in the future the church will be permitted to enter the reign of heaven."¹ John the Baptist says that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near. If we are to enter it when it comes, we will need to already be building something like the kingdom of heaven in the here and now. This is at the heart of Matthew's Gospel, Matthew, who gave us the prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Often, too often, Christians say, like the philosopher in the story from the Talmud, that Jesus and the New Testament have rendered the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible obsolete. Such pronouncements are often followed by assertions that we are saved by the cross, irrespective of how we live. But that sounds like the philosopher in the story from the Talmud, who doesn't seem to know the Gospel very well. The Gospel text says something quite different.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," says John. Repent; build the kingdom of heaven here, right now. The season of Advent invites us to take up this project. It invites us to build the kingdom. And so, one question for us this morning is: What would it look like to build the kingdom of heaven on earth?

Over the centuries there have been groups of Christians which have attempted to do just that, build the kingdom of heaven on earth. Among them was one that flourished in several locations not far from here from the mid 18th to the mid 20th centuries. We know them as the Shakers, though they called themselves, "The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing." The Shakers' earliest preaching consistently invoked the words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." The Shakers modeled their lives and communities on what they understood the kingdom of heaven to look like. They looked to scripture for guidance in every part of the design. They were celibate because it said "in the kingdom of heaven there was neither marrying nor giving in marriage," for example. Perhaps an idea more appealing to most of us, the Shakers became known for their code of hard work and their belief that order, simple beauty and efficiency were marks the kingdom of heaven on earth.

The Shaker villages were laid out in stunning symmetry. The grounds and buildings were kept neat and attractive. Beauty was present even in the most practical buildings and implements. The elegant lines of their buildings and furniture are still in favor to this day. The Shakers didn't believe in patenting their designs, but they invented many implements to make work more efficient than others turned to profit. Among them were the tool you can still buy to peel, core, and slice apples just by turning a crank. They also invented the circular saw, the clothespin, and

¹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: a Commentary on Matthew 1–7*, ed. Helmut Koester, Rev. ed., *Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 135.

the wheel driven washing machine, to name a few. But perhaps my favorite Shaker invention is the circular barn they built at the village in Hancock, Massachusetts. [Slide 1] It is an attractive stone structure that immediately catches your attention the moment you walk on the grounds that are now preserved as a museum. Underneath the barn's beauty, though, there is a masterful design making the running of a dairy barn as simple as possible. [Slide 2]

The center core of the barn is where the hay is stored, an ingenious idea, as will see. In the very center of core is a ventilation shaft that runs from the ground floor to the roof. In the old days hay barns regularly burned down. Farmers would pile dry hay into the haylofts. The trouble was, the hay was never 100% dry. It always had some moisture in it. And if it were just wet enough, it would begin to heat up, just like compost. Often it would heat up enough to spontaneously combust, and the hay and the barn go up in smoke. In the Shaker barn the hay was stored in the middle of the barn, and the central ventilation shaft was designed to help dispel the heat and keep the barn safe. The top wooden level of the barn provided additional ventilation as well as light. There are two main levels of the stone barn. The upper one was where the hay was delivered. The lower one was the main floor, where the cattle were fed and milked. Below that was a manure pit. Both levels and the manure pit were accessible to vehicles to make things easier.

[Slide 3] Wagons filled with hay entered the upper stone level. On entering, there was a circular floor all around the outside. [Slide 4] The wagons would proceed around the circular floor, and the hay would be forked into the center hay mow. [Slide 5] It was an ingenious design. The center core of the barn held the hay. The delivery wagons would enter the barn, proceed around the outside, deliver their load, and exit. They never had to back up, and several wagons could deliver hay at once.

[Slide 6] The first floor was the main work floor. The hay that had been delivered on the upper level was at easy reach in the central cylinder. The ring just outside the hay mow was a walkway for the workers and the feeding area. [slide 7] The cows were stanchioned in a ring just outside the walkway with their heads reaching in so they could eat. The workers simply went around the hay mow and forked the hay directly into the feed area where they were walking. Other workers would work their way around the circle of cows as they milked them. Behind the cows trapdoors could be lifted, and waste was raked into the area beneath the barn later to fertilize the fields. There was no wasted movement. It was a very effective design. And it was elegant, too. [slide 8].

Well, I hope you enjoyed my little field trip. I have always been enchanted by the Shakers, so I hope you'll forgive me. But my real justification for the excursion is that the Shakers are a very good example of a people which believed that it was important to live into the kingdom of heaven here on earth and which looked to the scripture to decide what the kingdom of heaven might look like.

As sentimental as looking at the Shakers can seem, it's hard not to be taken by their project. They seem to set me yearning for, longing after a world patterned after the kingdom of heaven. John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." John looked around him and saw a world anything but patterned after the kingdom of heaven. Nor did he see many who were aspiring to the kingdom. Repent he said. Turn around. Change. This isn't the way. His message sounds remarkably fresh, doesn't it? Who of us would look at our world and think that we have been building the kingdom of heaven?

The Shakers' day has no doubt passed. Agricultural communitarian projects such as theirs are ultimately quaint, a better fit for a day gone by. But before we dismiss them entirely, we might do well to recognize that simplicity, beauty, truth and honesty remain markers for the kingdom of heaven. Amen.